

FIRST STEPS

A Report on Elementary Grades Reading in Tennessee

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February 2016, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) pulled together stakeholders from across the state and set **an ambitious goal—that at least 75 percent of third graders would be proficient readers by 2025**. The goal originated from both stagnant third grade reading scores in the state and national research indicating that third grade reading is a key predictor of later life outcomes. Following the public commitment to the goal, the state embarked upon a campaign called *Read to be Ready* aimed at helping us meet this ambitious target.

It has now been two years since the original call to action. The children who will be third graders in 2025 are infants taking their first steps. We know that systematic change takes time, but we also recognize the urgency of this work.

So we ask, where are we now when it comes to early grades literacy achievement and instruction? Where have we seen progress and where are our continued areas of challenge?



From the baseline year of our redesigned state assessments that provide a more accurate picture of student progress toward more ambitious standards:

We see that only about one-third of Tennessee third graders are achieving at a proficient level. Data from our optional grade 2 assessment tells a similar story. **Students perform**

relatively well in the areas of listening comprehension, vocabulary, and language, but struggle with reading comprehension, foundational skills, fluency, and writing.



From observations in 162 classrooms across the state:

We see that teachers are implementing the new standards and incorporating crucial strategies such as interactive read aloud and shared reading. However, while students are successfully completing classroom tasks, the tasks rarely reflect the demands of the standards. **Findings point to three key areas for instructional improvement in the coming year:**

1) higher-quality and appropriately complex texts selected to build conceptual knowledge, 2) question sequences and tasks that build critical thinking skills and meet the demands of the standards, and 3) systematic and explicit foundational skills instruction with opportunities to practice through reading and writing.



From survey data collected through the department’s annual educator survey and progress monitoring efforts around the Read to be Ready Coaching Network:

We hear that Tennessee teachers are spending a significant amount of time sourcing materials to teach in this new way. The department recently released “unit starters”

anchored in concepts from the content area standards. In 50 pilot classrooms, we have seen a significant increase in the quality of texts, question sequences, and tasks in classrooms. Materials have challenged teachers’ expectations for what their students can accomplish. As one teacher said, “I’ve been teaching third grade a long time. This is the first year my kids will walk away with a clear understanding of the solar system.” **But reaching a point where higher-quality instructional materials are both available and used across all classrooms feels like a difficult hill to climb for many districts.**



From *Read to be Ready* summer grant programs:

We see that students attending one of the camps spent around 8 hours writing, 8 hours engaged in text-related activities, and around 25 hours reading. On average, students saw **improvements in their grade level reading accuracy and comprehension**, as well as on a measure of their motivation to read. Qualitative data also points to **increased engagement from teachers and students and their families**.



From **anecdotal stories** of our work and **open ended responses** to the annual educator survey:

We hear shouts of joy for this new way of teaching. One teacher wrote, “I am over-the-moon in love with our *Read to be Ready* initiative and the way that it has transformed my teaching.” **And we also hear uneasiness.** Another teacher said: “My main concern is still the amount of time it takes to do this job well.”

In March, we will release a more detailed analysis of our progress that will include findings from both the 2016–17 state assessment and from our classroom observations that we are using to guide the department’s work across the next year. Key next steps for the department are supporting teachers in foundational skills instruction and in the selection of strategic texts, questions, and tasks to build student knowledge. This support will include working with district and school leaders on quality materials selection and the strengthening of professional learning efforts (including coaching) designed to help teachers improve their instruction. It will also include the release of additional supports, such as more unit starters, and supporting alignment of expectations with elementary school principals and educator preparation providers.

Though we are still in the initial phases of this work, we are encouraged by the progress we have seen, especially the “aha moments” from our educators. For example, district leaders guided by department regional content experts have been surprised by the lack of quality texts used in their classrooms, and upon realizing this, have expressed determination to help teachers shift to more worthwhile texts. We have also seen teachers realizing that if they ask higher order thinking questions, their students will meet the challenge. As you continue to engage with these efforts, we hope you will have your own “aha” moments of the kind that we have seen across the state and will feel both the excitement and the importance of this work.

WHAT IS READ TO BE READY?

A series of state initiatives including...

- A network of about 250 district coaches training together on common literacy needs and coaching practices.
- District-led summer reading programs that served approximately 8,000 students in the summer of 2017.
- A group of 22 districts working through the Tennessee Early Literacy Network to improve early literacy through continuous improvement cycles.
- New standards and training for educator preparation programs to ensure that new teachers enter the classroom with a strong knowledge of promising literacy strategies.
- A new kindergarten readiness inventory and grade 2 assessment as well as a model for evaluating and developing early grades teachers using student growth portfolios.
- A group of almost 200 childcare centers that have joined the Early Literacy Matters pilot to test a series of online training modules paired with classroom text sets designed to encourage age-appropriate literacy practices.
- The release of Teaching Literacy in Tennessee ([here](#)), a resource that supports “the how” for early grades literacy instruction, as well as a companion guide for English Learners ([here](#)) and a set of literacy unit starter materials for grades K-3 ([here](#)).